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Friday, Feb 04, 2005


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Replace partisan rancor with kindness, honesty

By John Mark Hack
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Kindness, honesty and loyalty -- a wise friend describes these traits as essential guides for relationships. She tells me to remind myself of these traits when dealings get tough, to act accordingly and the stormiest of waters will smooth over.

My success in actually doing so has been variable at best, but I never lose sight of the significance of these qualities.

These traits are rarely associated with Kentucky politicians and are seldom in evidence in the vicious environs of the General Assembly. Some misguided individuals equate such traits with weakness and count the people who possess them as useless and incapable of noteworthy achievement.

But one state legislator personified these traits and achieved a more significant success than any of

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today's 138 legislators ever have. His defeat at the polls in November represents a grave loss to Kentucky.

Roger Thomas, a farmer from Smith's Grove in Warren County, had proudly served the 21st House District since 1996 and became chairman of the House Agriculture and Small Business Committee. In 2000, the last budget-year session to actually produce a budget, he sponsored controversial legislation that the National Governor's Association later called a model for rural development.

I don't know the challenger who beat Thomas, and I won't judge someone who hasn't begun his legislative service. In fact, I wish him well as he tries to fill some pretty big shoes.

But I do know Thomas. I would even say I know him pretty well. His party affiliation is irrelevant. He is thoughtful and full of integrity.

We worked extensively together crafting House Bill 611, the legislation that created the Kentucky Agricultural Development Fund. Thomas led the charge to provide financial assistance to agricultural entrepreneurs who would create new farm-based businesses and reduce dependence on tobacco.

Under his leadership, the legislature created the largest agricultural diversification initiative in U.S. history, using half of Kentucky's proceeds from the national tobacco settlement.

In the years that followed, our interactions increased. I served as the the development fund's first CEO. Thomas chaired the oversight committee charged with making sure I was doing my job. With \$120 million in play and tens of thousands of Kentuckians anxious about their futures, our communications were sometimes tense.

But Thomas never lost his decency, in public or private. He never lost his kindness or honesty. He remained loyal to his constituents. His commitment to a better Kentucky never wavered. He is, in fact, the embodiment of why rural areas are so vitally important to Kentucky.

Even in the most stressful of times, I knew where he stood, yet he was always willing to listen. He was reasoned and deliberative in his approach to complex questions.

It was this approach that created a highly progressive agricultural development program at a critical time. The stakes were high, and his kindness, honesty and loyalty were essential to the process of establishing this groundbreaking program.

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Since the program began, more than 1,900 agricultural projects have used more than \$167 million to create a new entrepreneurial culture among Kentucky farmers. Most of the funds have been matched dollar for dollar. The results compelled the Harvard Business School to use KADF as a case study on rural economic development.

In an atmosphere of absurd partisanship, Thomas stuck to his principles and worked across party lines to look for common interests rather than differences. He worked to unite people around the cause of a new rural economy, rather than divide them along the lines of narrow self-interest.

Thomas maintained kindness to those who disagreed with him. He always remained honest, even with the high stakes of political futures and economic realities in play. Today, he stays loyal to the people of his district and state, loyal to people over party, loyal to agriculture and the future of Kentucky.

Yes, I am suggesting more kindness, honesty and loyalty in Kentucky politics. Naive? Perhaps, especially given the recent unprecedented abuse of power and partisanship demonstrated by the state Senate majority. Idealistic? Definitely. But when we readily accept a total disconnection from our "ideal" way of operating, we surrender to forces more concerned with self-interest than common good.

In the vicious partisan environment that now typifies the General Assembly, its leadership, all its other members and the governor would serve us well by reflecting on Thomas' legacy and his tremendous record of accomplishment, founded on kindness, honesty and loyalty.

United we stand, divided we fall.

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